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WASHINGTON - Concerned by the current political crisis threatening elections in Sudan scheduled for April 11-13, today the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urged the U.S. government and international community to work with key Sudanese stakeholders to bring the elections to a timely and peaceful conclusion. Robust implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), culminating in the Southern Sudan referendum mandated to take place on January 9, 2011, must be ensured by all parties.

Government actions and statements by President Omar al-Bashir are negatively impacting both the prospects for credible and peaceful elections that can be accepted by all key leaders and parties, as well as a free and fair referendum process. Government repression during the campaign season has led SPLM Presidential candidate Yasir Arman to withdraw from his race against Bashir. Other opposition presidential candidates have followed suit.

USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo stated: "We had hoped that the elections could be conducted in a free and fair environment. However, detention of opposition party activists by security forces and the National Congress Party's non-cooperation, manipulation, and reckless rhetoric holding the referendum hostage to the flawed electoral process endanger the future of the CPA."

Election observers have reported serious problems with the election campaign to date. USCIRF urges the U.S. government and the international community to work urgently with Sudanese authorities to address technical problems and to permit campaigning and voting free of further intimidation or interference. Additionally, adequate security should be provided before, during, and after actual polling to enable participation by all eligible voters regardless of religious or ethnic background.

"USCIRF urges Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to increase her personal engagement to resolve this crisis and bring the elections to an on-time and peaceful conclusion. The elections are the most important milestone to date of CPA implementation, and the process is an important test of the Administration's policy of incentivized engagement. The stakes are very high: failing to hold the 2011 referendum could reignite civil war between the North and South with the certainty of horrific human rights abuses and violations of freedom of religion or belief."

The CPA serves as a model for political accommodation for the legitimate grievances of the various parties. The outcome and the environment in which the elections have been conducted will inform expectations for the 2011 referendum on the South's political future, the separate referendum on the status of Abyei, and the popular consultations to be held in Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains State and Blue Nile State.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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